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SUBJECT: REPORTING TRIP TO SOUTHERN JORDANIAN TOWN DRAWS
CRITICISM IN ONLINE PRESS

REF: AMMAN 858

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (S/NF) Summary: A routine Embassy meeting with the mayor of a remote town in southern Jordan has attracted negative media attention. One Islamist commentator characterized the visit as a violation of Jordanian sovereignty and has called for the Ambassador to be convoked. The reaction, while limited so far to online media, contains echoes of a security incident from 2007 which resulted in the departure of the Deputy Political Counselor. End Summary.

Visit to Ma'an

¶2. (S) On April 2, Poloff and Political Specialist visited the rural, tribal city of Ma'an and met with Mayor Khaled Al-Khattab (reftel). Throughout the meeting, city council members, a member of parliament, tribal sheikhs, and the head of the local chamber of commerce entered the room to chat, drink coffee, and smoke. The visitors also freely joined in the conversation. Near the end of the meeting, the discussion turned to standard questions about U.S. policy, including the Israel-Palestinian peace process, Jordan, and Iraq.

¶3. (S/NF) Also present throughout the discussion was a representative from the General Intelligence Directorate (GID), introduced at the top of the meeting as the mayor's "brother." He took copious notes without trying to disguise what he was doing. After the meeting, Poloff and Polspec had a brief, chance encounter with a local journalist in the hall of the municipality building. The journalist introduced himself as the editor of a small circulation weekly paper in Ma'an and solicited basic information about the purpose of the visit.

Media Reaction

¶4. (SBU) Later the same day, a two-paragraph item about the visit appeared on a popular internet news site, Rum Online. The article, attributed to "Rum's correspondent in Ma'an," was mostly factual, but ended with speculation that "the visit was to inquire about political developments in Ma'an and Islamic movements."

¶5. (SBU) A second, more detailed article appeared April 13 on the online news site Zad Al-Urdun. The article featured extensive commentary by prominent Islamist lawyer and former Bar Association head Saleh Armouti, who called the visit "suspicious" and "a violation of Jordanian sovereignty." Armouti said that "diplomatic norms" required prior permission from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to "ensure that such visits only serve the national good, along with economic and investment purposes." According to the story, Armouti asked Foreign Minister Nasser Judeh to summon the

Ambassador for an explanation of the trip. The end of the article cited Ma'an's mayor as downplaying "the importance of the visit" and stressing that it "did not violate diplomatic norms." Emphasizing the positive, Khattab is quoted as saying that "during the conversation, the issue of the attractive (sic) investment in Ma'an was discussed and that the visiting delegation took notes."

Comment

¶6. (S/NF) While it is not clear what drew the Zad Al-Urdun commentary more than ten days after the actual trip, its shrill tone makes clear that the visit raised the hackles of some here in Jordan. The reaction contains echoes of a September 2007 incident in which the Deputy PolChief met with Muslim imams in Zarqa, Jordan's second largest city, to talk about Islamist influence there. Following those meetings, GID officials alerted the Embassy to a specific, non-counterable threat which quickly resulted in his evacuation from the country, but was later suspected to be a planned GID response to dampen Embassy reporting on sensitive domestic issues. In light of this recent parallel incident, the Ambassador will raise concerns about the article with senior Jordanian officials.

Brown